

Testimony

of Lisa Thomson, R.Ed APPLES, Norwalk, CT

HB5014: An Act making adjustments to state expenditures and revenues for the fiscal year ending June 30, 2013

Members of the Appropriations Committee, thank you for the opportunity to submit my testimony regarding reforming or replacing the current education funding model.

I am here to support and endorse a more equitable funding system for the children who attend our Connecticut public schools; one that is based upon a simplified, common sense concept that puts students first and takes into account their individual learning needs at the public schools they attend.

I am an executive member and co-founder of a grassroots organization known as R.Ed APPLES of Norwalk (www.redapplesnorwalk.org), which has 100+ registered members that include parents, PTC/PTA Presidents, educators, taxpayers, concerned citizens, neighborhood activists, politicians and local business owners. We are political but non-partisan, independent, pro education and pro teacher, but most importantly, pro change and reform across a spectrum of educational issues ranging from greater adult accountability to school finance reform.

Although we are located in Fairfield County, Norwalk is an urban school district, with high levels of poverty and a significant number of at-risk children that have additional learning needs that require more resources than what might ordinarily be required for wealthier communities in Connecticut.

It is well known that urban school districts have seen a jump in their poverty levels across the nation and Connecticut is no exception. As an example, Norwalk's student population has held fairly steady over the years at approximately 11,000. Yet, in the past 5 years, the number of students that qualify for Free and Reduced Lunch has jumped from 2,555 students in 2005 to 4,744 in 2010 (an increase from 23.1 % of our total student body to 43.7%.) Also, 13% of that base represents ELL students.

It is not my intention to pit one city against another in a fight over limited state dollars, but it seems to me that the current system has an arbitrary foundation level, does not take into account student needs, calculates municipal wealth unfairly, and fails to fund special education satisfactorily. As the 6th largest city in Connecticut, these represent Norwalk's educational issues.

Education is the most important investment we can make as a state and country. Without educated citizens, our economy is strained even further and businesses will not invest in our state.

The current funding system is not transparent. As we move toward more accountability as a nation and state, it is important that parents and taxpayers know where their income tax dollars are going. I am speaking of history here, but any formula that required the proposal of another bill to try and explain the funding formula to the public, was probably a convoluted one.

While money alone will not solve our educational crisis, a more equitable, balanced and transparent formula would make it easier for the 169 school districts to share and compare best practices by comparing apples to apples not apples to oranges when trying to improve student achievement.

I hope that the Appropriation Committee will weigh in on the ECS Task Force and challenge our state's educational funding model so as to ensure a more fair, transparent and effective funding system for our great State.

I would also hope that the committee will strongly encourage the ECS Task Force to come to Lower Fairfield County and speak to the residents of Norwalk or Stamford. These two cities represent two substantial economic engines for Connecticut. Residents and businesses send considerable tax dollars to Hartford, yet do not see a fair share of these tax dollars returning to educate their own low income students.

Norwalk's predicament is not unknown to state officials as Norwalk's Common Council passed an ECS Resolution passed in January 2011. (See attachment)

I strongly urge the Committee to simplify the ECS funding model and move towards a more transparent student based funding model, that is straightforward and directed at its intended beneficiaries - the students of Connecticut.

Thank you,

Lisa Thomson
Co- Founder – R.Ed APPLES of Norwalk
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Attachment: Norwalk Common Council Resolution on ECS Passed on January 25, 2011

Whereas, The State of Connecticut **Educational Cost Sharing** grant system is Connecticut's primary education equalization aid program; and

Whereas the ECS formula is designed to allocate grant funds to school districts to fairly reflect student need as a function of poverty, test performance and limited English proficiency as well as district wealth, and

Whereas, it is the contention of the Common Council of the City of Norwalk that, when compared with other Connecticut municipalities of similar sociological composition, the ECS grant allocation to the City of Norwalk is substantially smaller; and

Whereas, the Council cites as example the following data:

The growth of Norwalk's percentage of students from non-English Language homes from 24.3% in the year 2000-2001 to 35.0% in the year 2005-2006, and the growth in the percentage of non-English language speaking students from 7.7% to 12.5% during the same period (while the across the State comparable percentage increased from only 3.7% to 5.2%).

The growth in numbers of Norwalk children eligible for free or reduced priced meals from 23.1% in 2004-2005 to 39.9% in 2009-2010 (while the comparable State-wide percentages increased from 26.4% to 32.9%).

The percentage of Norwalk's educational costs derived from Connecticut Educational Cost Sharing Grants decreased from 11.7% to 11.1% between 2001 and 2008, ranking Norwalk second-to-last in the percentage category and last in actual revenue sharing dollars received among Connecticut's cities as demonstrated in the following chart:

District	% of School Revenues Provided By State	2007-2008 Budget (\$ millions)	State Portion (\$ millions)
Bridgeport	68.2	268	183
Danbury	69.2	119	83
Hartford	63.2	364	230
New Britain	60.4	137	83
New Haven	60.9	312	189
Norwalk	11.1	160	18
Stamford	8.8	234	21
Waterbury	56.2	232	130

Pastoral communities without apparent urban challenges often receive comparatively higher ECS support than the City of Norwalk.

District	ECS % 2007-2008
Canterbury	46.5
Canton	18.2
Hebron	35.0
Mansfield	33.3
Watertown	35.6
Wethersfield	18.5
Wolcott	44.7
Woodstock	35.4
Norwalk	11.1

and, **Whereas**, the Common Council of the City of Norwalk, lacking more conclusive argument that the allocation of grants resulting from State ECS formula has been adjusted to reflect rapid sociological and demographic changes of the past decade, and that these changes would increase Norwalk's portion of the State Grant allocation.

Now, therefore, be it resolved: The Norwalk Common Council respectfully requests, on behalf of the Citizens of Norwalk, that Connecticut Education Cost Sharing Grants be reviewed and appropriately revised to reflect recent changes in sociological, economic and demographic information; and adjusted favorably to account for such changes.